

SUPPORT FOR GREEN CONFERENCES ONLY LIP SERVICE—SO WHAT CAN BE DONE?

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Abstract

Although support for making conferences more green and sustainable have grown over the years, such philanthropic considerations are overshadowed by the hard factors ultimately determining attendance to conferences. These include factors such as time and distance, the nature of the conference, and destination attractiveness. Environmental sustainability of the conference or the venue remains a poor influencing factor. This study therefore examines to what extent various 'conference green attributes' or sustainable interventions are related to hard factors and if so determine ways of influencing attendees to be more selective toward green conferences. The study explores this relationship in a sample of German conference attendees, with results indicating support for the status quo but also reveals some potential avenues for changing attendees' preference for green conferences.

Keywords: green conferences, hard and soft factors, environmental sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Research undertaken in the field of conference tourism has revealed that delegates' recognition of negative environmental impacts is increasing (Han 2014). Thus, staying competitive can be facilitated by implementing green practices into conferences (Han and Hwang 2016). Consequently, various studies have focused on the importance of greening on the supply side (Lee et al. 2013). German publications have put an emphasis on green meetings during the last few years (Wagner 2014; GCB 2016b) as well as the largest European fair for the meetings industry (taking place in Frankfurt) 'Incorporating Meetings made in Germany - The Worldwide Exhibition for incentive travel, meetings and events' (IMEX) has focused on greening and sustainability (Fink 2016). Research focusing on the conference participant however is still limited to special aspects and specific conference venues (Lee et al. 2013; Wong et al. 2014; Han and Hwang 2016). Therefore the aim of this article is to examine to what degree sustainable efforts of the supply side are important for delegates as well as if they even have an impact on their decision-making process to attend a conference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer behaviour and consumer decision-making

Consumer behaviour and consumer decision-making is a process of receiving and systemising information with the aim to make a decision and to consume a product or service (Moutinho 1987). Aspects underlying consumption are motives or needs which want to be satisfied and which result in a drive or action (Evans et al. 2009). The expectancy-value model (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) takes up this point and assumes that one's motivation to take action relies upon the expectancy whether the action will result in an incentive accompanied by a personal value or not (Roese and Sherman 2007). As research in the events industry is still limited parallels are often drawn to the tourism sector (Mair and Thompson 2009). So it was done with the research field of motivation and the 'theory of reasoned action' (TRA), one representative of the expectancy-value models (Yoo and Chon 2010). According to the TRA, a person's motivation to perform a specific behaviour can be attributed to its intention (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). This intention is influenced by the person's own attitude towards an action as well as by subjective norms (Perugini and Bagozzi 2001, Prayag et al. 2013). Lortie and Castogiovanni (2015, p. 938) equate these subjective norms with a "social pressure" in form of attitudes or expectations that referent others have regarding the performance of a behaviour.

In further studies Ajzen (1985) discovered limitations in his theory and revised his work by adding the concept of perceived behavioural control (PBC) to the TRA. The new model was called 'theory of planned behaviour' (TPB) (Song et al. 2012) and is meanwhile described as one of the most applied theories in terms of foreseeing and explaining individual's behaviour (Lortie and Castogiovanni 2015). The TPB reflects that not only attitude towards behaviour and subjective norms is influencing a person's intention but also one's perception "[...] of the ease of performing certain behavior" (Hornig et al. 2013, p. 196). Experiences act a part in the evaluation to what degree a future behaviour can be controlled and how easy or difficult the performance is perceived (Lortie and Castogiovanni 2015). The PBC can independently and directly influence behaviour (Armitage and Conner 2001).

One point of criticism regarding the TPB is that not all behaviours are rational (Planing 2014; Sniehotta et al. 2014). Unconscious influences on behaviour, like emotions, are neglected (Sheeran et al. 2013) and no cognitive or affective processes are taken into consideration (Arvola et al. 2008). Ajzen (2011) defends himself in stating that the model neither assumes that those beliefs are rational or without any influences nor does it represent accurate reality. Those beliefs can be irrational and biased by emotions like for instance anger, pride or guilt (ibid.). Apart from how people's beliefs are materialised, their perceptions of behavioural control as well as attitude and intentions eventually and automatically follow from those beliefs (Geraerts et al. 2008; Ajzen 2011).

The TPB conveys an understanding of the motives that lie behind a consumer's behaviour by analysing the variables which influence a consumer in the consideration of taking action or not (Schiffman and Kanuk 2004). While there has been a lot of research in the tourism market regarding the decision-making process of a leisure tourist (Mair and Thompson 2009), the field of business tourism and especially the conference industry has been mostly neglected so far (Abbey and Link 1994; MalekMohammadi and Mohamed 2011). Most studies in this area have focused

on the supply side, which leaves the conference participant as an under researched field behind (Leach et al. 2008).

However, there has already been a development since Lee and Back (2005) stated that the lack of moderate and trustworthy theoretical framework in the field of conference participants' decision-making and the influencing factors constitute a real problem. This is shown by the amount of attendee-related studies in the conference market (Var et al. 1985; Oppermann and Chon 1997; Rittichainuwat et al. 2001; Severt et al. 2007; Zhang et al. 2007; Leach et al. 2008; Yoo and Chon 2008; Mair and Thompson 2009; Yoo and Zhao 2010). Studies have in common that they take the paradigm of cognitive decision-making as a starting point (Yoo and Chon 2010) which strengthen the argumentation of Arvola et al. (2008) regarding the influence of emotions and bias into behaviour. The underlying factors are better known as 'push' and 'pull' factors (Oppermann and Chon 1997; Malek Mohammadi and Mohamed 2011).

There has been done lots of research on examining the factors or attributes that 'push' or 'pull' and therefore, also like the TPB states, influences a consumer in taking action or not, specifically: influence participation in any meetings, incentives, conventions or exhibitions (MICE) or other related events (Whitfield et al. 2014a). However, respondents to interviews or questionnaires have mainly been meeting or / and event planners (Whitfield et al. 2014b). In order to increase attendance and to boost delegate satisfaction few studies have also dealt with factors which have an effect on the decision-making process of delegates whether to attend a conference (Malek Mohammadi and Mohamed 2010; Targeted News Service 2015).

Attributes affecting conference participation decision-making

The current state of research presents one model of conference attributes by Zhang et al. (2007) which is based on Oppermann and Chon's (1997) version. In comparing these two models it is noticeable that location factors have been divided into 'attractiveness' and 'accessibility' (Zhang et al. 2007). Moreover, Oppermann and Chon's (1997) 'intervening opportunities' have been taken out and a 'total cost factor' has been added including 'monetary cost' and 'time cost' (ibid.). This approach is identical to Var et al.'s (1985) statement that costs have a strong influence on account of the constraint of resources. Conference factors (e.g. programme, networking, learning effects) and personal factors (e.g. time availability, previous experiences) have remained unchanged (Zhang et al. 2007). The most noticeable fact against the background of this article is the neglect of any attributes which are related to sustainability or ecology. Research in this area started around 2008 (Rogers 2008). However, it seems as if environmentally friendly practices have not been considered as influencing attributes when examining general impacts on the decision-making process. This is contrary to the fact that among researchers and industry professionals it can be identified a universal agreement regarding the fact that the trend towards implementing sustainable or green practices in conferences as well as in venues is growing (Rogers 2008; Smith-Christensen 2009; Thomson 2009; Merrilees and Marles 2011; Goldblatt 2012).

Green conference industry initiatives in Germany

Sustainability is defined as a central topic in the German conference industry and the implementation of green meetings into the meetings and conference industry has been set as one key objective by the German Convention Bureau (GCB) (GCB 2016b). In this context, several initiatives have been created to take sustainable practices into account (ibid.). In 2012, the German Convention Bureau (GCB) and the European Association of Event-Centres (EVVC) have initiated the ‘fairpflichtet – Sustainability Code of the German Event Industry’ which is described as a voluntary entrepreneurial commitment for managerial responsibility in the organisation and implementation of meetings and events (GCB and EVVC 2016a). But this is only one initiative besides others used in Germany: the Green Globe Certification Standard (Green Globe 2016a), ‘Sustainability Consultant’ seminars (GCB 2016c), the standard of the International Organization of Standardisation (ISO) ISO 20121 (ISO 2016a) or the German Sustainable Building Council (DGNB) certification (German Sustainable Building Council 2016a). During the last few years, companies or associations have also used the sustainability movement in the events and conference industry as a new opportunity for business (Moderer et al. 2012). The FAMAB communications association for fair architects, event agencies and event caterers has for example launched its own ‘sustainable company’ and ‘sustainable project’ certifications (FAMAB 2016).

Behind this background of the importance of sustainability in German conference industry, the central research questions of the study focuses on the perception and importance of sustainability on the side of the delegate: (a) determine the relative importance of environmental sustainability considerations in German conference attendees’ decisions to attend conferences, and (b) determine the extent with which several environmental interventions—promoting the importance of green conferences, promoting the importance of green venues, promoting individual green attitudes and behaviors, and promoting company support for sustainable policies—affect the importance of various considerations (conference attributes, environmental sustainability, time, distance, and cost, as well as destination image and attractiveness) which German conference attendees consider when deciding to attend conferences.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection. An online survey of conference attendees in Germany was conducted between 12 July 2016 and 15 August 2016. The survey targeted delegates who have taken part in one or more domestic German conference during the last two years. For conducting the survey a mixed method of mail embedded URL and open-web based questionnaire was chosen. A pilot test was sent out to 15 random delegates. They were asked to both answer the questionnaire and to comment aspects like wording, ambiguous questions, layout, sequencing and length of the questionnaire. Based on these pilot responses the questionnaire was revised. Afterwards, 311 delegates from several participation lists of conferences in 2016 have been invited by a personalised email to take part in the survey, aiming to address them personally and create a higher response rate (Heerwegh et al. 2005; Trespalacios and Perkins 2016). Further respondents were recruited via social business networks XING and LinkedIn. The survey URL was published in business events communities as well as it was mentioned in groups related to conferences and sustainability. Besides, the survey was supported by ‘tw tagungswirtschaft’ a German trade magazine and by

veranstaltungsplaner.de a German MICE association via their social media channels as well as the online survey was integrated into their newsletter. In total, 134 delegates completed the questionnaire.

Measures. Four predictor and four dependent variables were included in the study. The four dependent variables were factors derived by principal components analysis conducted to reduce an original inventory of 9 items designed to capture various considerations determining respondents' decision to attend a conference. Respondents indicated how influential each item is in their decision to attend conferences using a 5-point Likert degree of influence scale anchored on each end by 5-very high influence and 1-very low influence. The original 9 items are listed in Table 2 below, arranged depending on the four derived principal components (PC) to which each loaded after factor analysis as is the post-varimax extraction correlation estimate of each item with the derived factors, as well as the % of variance accounted for by each of the four derived principal component. All assumptions required for factor analysis was met, with KMO sampling adequacy (.703) and Bartlett's test of sphericity resulting in significant test value (493.97, df=36). All 9 items inputted for analysis had MSA values greater than 0.50.

The predictor variables consisted of four summated scales each of which was comprised of several items. These include (1) the importance of green attributes in conferences, 12 items measured using a 4-point Likert scale (4-very important, 1-not very important), maximum 48 points, (2) the importance of green attributes in conference venues 5 items also measured using a 4-point Likert scale (4-very important, 1-not very important), maximum 20 points, (3) individual attitudes about "greening" and traveling to a conference (7 items, 5-point agreement scale), maximum 35 points, and (4) company support for sustainability policies (2-items, 5-point agreement scale), maximum 10 points. Altogether, these four predictor variables represent environmental interventions or measures that can be used to improve conference attendees' environmental considerations when deciding to attend a conference.

Analysis. As the aim of the study is to determine how environmental sustainability considerations can be enhanced for conference attendees when deciding to attend a conference (relative to other considerations such as the conference attributes, time, distance, cost, and destination attributes), separate multiple regression analyses were conducted for each of the four principal components which altogether comprise the different dimensions of considerations influencing attendees' decision to attend a conference. Each principal component was therefore assigned as the dependent variable in separate multiple regression runs. The goal of the analysis was to quantify relative influence via the beta coefficients of the predictor variables (i.e., promoting green conference attributes, green conference venues, fostering attendees' green attitudes and travel, and company support for sustainable policies).

FINDINGS

Sample profile. A total of 134 respondents with complete data were collected at the end of the survey period. Majority of the respondents (59%) attended between 1 to 2 conferences within the last year. The conferences were mostly (53%) corporate conferences followed by association conferences (37.3%). Slightly more than half the

respondents were female (55.32%). More than half the survey respondents were young professionals or occupied lower line positions in their organizations and more than half the respondents belonged to the finance, media, or healthcare industries. See Table 1.

Importance of environmental sustainability of considerations. Mean ratings (and s.d.) for the different scale items loading onto each of the four factors were calculated and compared. The results are reported in the last two columns of Table 2. For this sample of German conference attendees, the most important factor influencing their decision to attend conferences is the conference attributes ($M=4.28$, $SD=.67$). This is followed by time, distance, and cost considerations ($M=3.76$, $SD=.87$) and considerations regarding the attractiveness, image, and safety of the destination ($M=3.06$, $SD=.92$). Environmental sustainability rated the lowest among the four factors considered when attending conferences ($M=2.51$, $SD=1.04$).

Table 1
Sample characteristics of German conference attendees

		<i>N</i>	%
No. of conferences attended	1-2	79	59.0
	3-5	42	31.3
	More than 5	13	9.7
Type of conference attended	Corporate conference	71	53.0
	Association conference	50	37.3
	Governmental conference	13	9.7
Gender	Female	74	55.2
	Male	60	44.8
Position	Trainee / Apprentice / Intern / Working student	35	26.1
	Secretary/Assistant/Clerk in Charge/Project Leader	21	15.7
	Young professional	21	15.7
	Head of Division / Department	12	9.0
	Others	10	7.5
	Managing Director / Chairman of the Board	8	6.0
	Division Manager / Production Manager	7	5.2
	Director	4	3.0
	Authorised Officer with Procurement	4	3.0
	Owner	4	3.0
	CEO, CFO, COO etc.	3	2.2
	Managing Partner	3	2.2
	Vice Chairman / Member of the Board	1	.7
	Chairman / Member of the Supervisory Board	1	.7
Industry	Finance / Insurance / Real Estate	29	21.6
	Communication / Marketing / Media	24	17.9
	Healthcare / Pharmaceutical industry	17	12.7
	Food Services / Hotels / Tourism	13	9.7
	Construction / Car industry / Transport / Logistics	9	6.7
	Legal Services / Consulting	9	6.7
	Research / Education	9	6.7
	Telecommunications / IT / Technology	7	5.2
	Others	6	4.5
	Wholesale and Retail Trade	5	3.7
	Energy / Environmental	3	2.2
	Government / Civil Service	3	2.2

Table 2
Factors considered in decision to attend a conference

Factors (extracted), scale item loadings, and post rotation correlation estimates	Component % of variance	Degree of influence*	
		Mean	s.d.
Conference attributes (PC2)	24.6	4.28	(.67)
(1) Programme, content, speakers (.55)			
(2) Networking opportunities (.89)			
(3) Professional advancement (.82)			
Time, distance, & cost (PC3)	10.8	3.76	(.87)
(4) Monetary and time cost (.69)			
(5) Travel distance (.82)			
Destination image, attractiveness, safety (PC4)	8.4	3.06	(.92)
(6) Attractiveness of destination/image (.73)			
(7) Safety/security of destination (.83)			
Environmental sustainability (PC1)	33.2	2.51	(1.04)
(8) Env. sustainability of conf. venue (.94)			
(9) Env. sustainability of conference (.95)			

*5-point scale, 5-very high influence and 1-very low influence

Effectiveness of environmental interventions in influencing attendees' decision to attend conferences. Separate multiple regression analysis was conducted with the four PC components inputted as dependent variables in each run. The four environmental interventions (importance of green conference, importance of green venues, individual green attitudes, and company support for sustainable policies) were inputted as predictor variables for all analyses. As the current inquiry involves an exploratory approach, the predictor variables were inputted in step-wise fashion.

The intercorrelation matrix between the different variables used in the analyses, as well as their respective means and standard deviation, are reported in Table 3. All assumptions necessary for conducting step-wise multiple regression were met: Collinearity statistics showed VIF values ranging from 1.085 (for *company support for sustainable policies*) to 2.087 (for *individual green attitudes*). Tolerance values ranged from .479 (*individual green attitudes*) to .921 (for *company support for sustainable policies*). Durbin-Watson value = 2.052, which indicates that the assumption for independent errors was met. Examination of the distribution of residuals and P-P plots of standardized residuals revealed no anomalous patterns that would invalidate the model.

Table 3
Inter-correlation matrix (Pearson) and descriptive statistics
(N = 134)

	Importance of green conferences	Importance of green venues	Individual's green attitudes	Support from company for green meetings	PC1: Env. sustainability of conference & venue	PC2: Conf. attributes & career benefits	PC3: Time, distance, effort, & cost	PC4: Dest. Image (safety, appeal)
Importance of green conferences	1	0.6585	0.6736	0.2803	0.4867	0.0405	0.1629	0.0160
Importance of green venues	0.6585	1	0.5954	0.3756	0.4865	0.1641	0.1374	0.1866
Individual's green attitudes	0.6736	0.5954	1	0.3901	0.4680	0.0486	0.2748	0.0213
Support from company for green meetings	0.2803	0.3756	0.3901	1	0.3699	-0.0519	0.2394	0.2026
PC1: Env. sustainability of conference & venue	0.4867	0.4865	0.4680	0.3699				
PC2: Conference attributes & career benefits	0.0405	0.1641	0.0486	-0.0519				
PC3: Time, distance, effort, & cost	0.1629	0.1374	0.2748	0.2394				
PC4: Destination image (safety, appeal)	0.0160	0.1866	0.0213	0.2026				
Mean	35.6045	15.0149	22.8731	5.8209	(For factors derived from PC analysis, Mean = 0 and SD = 1.0)			
Std. dev.	6.3873	2.8310	4.8812	1.8832				

Values in bold are Pearson correlations different from 0 with a significance level alpha=0.05

Table 4
Step-wise multiple regression results

	F1: Environmental sustainability of conference & venue	F2: Conference attributes & career benefits	F3: Time, distance, effort, & cost	F4: Destination Image (safety, appeal)
Model fit:				
R ²	0.3223	0.0269	0.0755	0.0411
F	20.6039	3.6537	10.7843	5.6512
Pr > F	< 0.0001	0.0581	0.0013	0.0189
Predictors and β coefficients :				
Importance of green conferences	0.282**			
Importance of green venues	0.223 *	0.058†		
Individual's green attitudes			0.275***	
Support from company for green meetings	0.207**			0.203*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; † $p = 0.0581$

The key results of the four step-wise multiple regression analyses are reported in Table 4 and revealed the following for this population of German conference attendees:

- Considerations surrounding environmental sustainability of conferences and venues was impacted significantly ($F(3, 130)=20.6, p<.001, R^2=.322$) by the (perceived) importance of green conferences ($\beta=.282$), the (perceived) importance of green venues ($\beta=.223$), and company support for green meetings ($\beta=.207$). Surprisingly, the step-wise regression analysis eliminated individual's green attitudes and behavior as a significant variable impacting German attendees' considerations for environmental sustainability.

- Considerations about conference attributes (e.g., the speakers, programme, and content) and the benefits that accrue to one's career (e.g., networking opportunities and professional advancement) was only marginally modeled by the set of four predictor variables ($F(1, 132)=3.654, p=.058, R^2=.027$). Only (perceived) importance of green venues ($\beta=.058, t=1.911, p=.058$) showed marginal degree of impact on German attendees' decision to attend conferences. In general, however, none of the four environmental interventions could be said to impact greatly in changing the importance of this type of consideration.

- The importance of green conferences, green venues, and company support for green meetings were not significant at all in influencing German attendees consideration of time, distance, and cost when deciding to attend conferences ($F(1, 132)=10.78, p=.0013, R^2=.075$). For this particular consideration, only an individual's green attitudes (and behavior) exhibited significant impact ($\beta=.275$) upon considerations of time, distance, and cost.

- When it comes to considerations regarding the destination's attractiveness, image, and perceived safety and security, only company support for green meetings proved instrumental ($\beta=.203$) overall in influencing this type of consideration ($F(1, 132)=5.65, p=.0189, R^2=.041$).

DISCUSSION

The aforementioned results reveal that, despite conference attendees becoming generally more socially responsible and rating green attributes to be important (Lee et al, 2013), such benevolent considerations do not take primacy in the decision to attend conferences, at least in the sample of German conference attendees that this study examined.

The 'hard' factors surrounding conference attributes (e.g., the programme, content, speakers) and the benefits they confer to attendees' career advancement and networking opportunities remain the paramount and decisive considerations when attending a conference. Furthermore, it appears that such 'hard' factors are unalterable by any of the four environmentally sustainable interventions examined (i.e., increasing the perceived importance of green conferences, green venues; increasing individual attitudes, beliefs, and practices about green behavior; and increasing company support for green conferences). It appears that greening conferences and venues remain independent of and compartmentalized from the more self-serving considerations when attending conferences. However, the fact that the organisers' greening of conferences is supported by delegates shows that there is no outright rejection of environmental sustainability in conferences. It might be assumed that a phenomenon which has already appeared in several studies of tourism can be taken as an explanation: Consumers often behave differently in other surroundings by allowing

themselves to escape the daily patterns (Barr et al. 2001; Prillwitz and Barr 2011). Thus, environmental sustainability patterns are covered by the mentioned ‘hard’ factors which are more important for delegates in that situation.

A closer examination of the raw median ratings of the importance of green attributes from the sample of German conference attendees in this study further elaborates on the aforementioned result. Table 5 reflects the general lack of willingness of German conference attendees to actively contribute to or spend time on sustainability especially if this is accompanied with personal restrictions (e.g. travel choice). These results support the statement that the general interest in conference sustainability remains low (Mykletun et al. 2014) and that the majority is not willing to inform themselves about the degree of greening of a conference. In studies about purchasing behaviour this phenomenon is explained by a simple lack of time (Leire and Thidell 2005; Liobikienė et al. 2016). However it needs to be said that in general the majority (46.27% / 62) of delegates have a positive attitude towards green conferences, as their opinion was that a green conference is not accompanied by restrictions and therefore it is not true that a green conference can not reach the scope of a non-environmentally friendly conference. Nevertheless, the knowledge about greening is limited and an evaluation of attributes seems difficult as almost the same percentage (41.79% / 56) replied that they do not know if a green conference is accompanied with restrictions in scope and quality. This can be related to the fact that in Germany sustainability is a current topic but in politics the main emphasis has been put on economic or social sustainability whereas environmental sustainability has not arrived yet with all its facets in daily life (Kröger 2015).

Table 5
Descriptive statistics importance of green attributes for conferencew

Green attributes for conferences	Median	s.d.
Hotels in walking distance	4.0	0.975
Organisers should green conference	4.0	0.962
Can go without conference bag	4.0	1.051
Greening cost should be incorporated in fee	4.0	1.095
Travel by train	3.5	1.140
Inform myself about the degree of greening in advance	2.0	1.136
Use car sharing	2.0	1.207

There is some cause for optimism in that three of the four considerations examined showed susceptibility to being influenced by environmental interventions, with estimates showing that attendees’ considerations regarding the environmental sustainability of conferences and venues can be increased from .142 to .324 on the raw 5-point influence scale if a corresponding unit change in company support and perceived importance of green conferences and venues is achieved. As a positive side effect reasons of time, cost or distance can automatically lead to a greener behavior – a result which can interact with the factor that an individual’s green attitude can enhance an attendee’s consideration of time, cost, and distance when deciding upon a conference.

Finally, the findings show that an attendee’s consideration of a destination’s image, attractiveness, and safety can be influenced by company support for green conferences, which suggests that organizations—through their support for sustainable conferences—can help

shape attendees' considerations of how attractive a destination can be when attending conferences. The research findings suggest that it is essential to use delegates' positive fundamental attitude towards greening a conference. It is important to carefully implement green alternatives without creating the impression that something is missing. The aim should be that delegates start to consider a green conference product as something normal because they are not used to something else anymore. As environmental sustainability becomes more and more important in daily life in Germany (DESTATIS 2014; Federal Environment Ministry 2014), greening conferences should be one part of this movement and should not offer an opportunity to escape the daily patterns (Prillwitz and Barr 2011). Furthermore, the "embryonic state" of conference sustainability (Merrilees and Marles 2011, p. 367) should be improved. Conference sustainability is often just implemented in order to do 'something' but not anchored as a long-time strategy. Thus, it cannot be communicated effectively and credible and will not increase the degree of importance of sustainability on the side of the delegate.

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